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States leery of cattle from Montana

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States worried about brucellosis-infected cattle are imposing strict rules on Montana livestock and are cracking down specifically on ranches in counties surrounding Yellowstone National Park.

"We all realize, in states viewing this from afar, that Yellowstone is a huge problem," said Dr. Dennis Hughes, Nebraska state veterinarian. "I'm hoping that Montana can work its way out of this thing. From what I hear, what Montana people tell me, and Wyoming people and Idaho people tell me, it's a heck of a mess."

Of the half-dozen states to tighten rules in the past week for importing Montana cattle, Nebraska went the furthest, imposing extraordinary requirements for cattle coming from Madison, Gallatin, Park, Sweet Grass, Stillwater and Carbon counties. By car, the distance from one end of the affected area to the other is roughly 280 miles.

Idaho, Washington, Colorado, North Dakota and South Dakota also drafted rules for Montana cattle last week, though not as stringent as Nebraska's.

Cattle coming into Nebraska from those counties will not only have to be certified brucellosis-free, but all animals older than 18 months in their herd also will have to test negative even if they're not going to market. Of particular concern are Montana's feeder cattle, which are calves shipped at a young age to feedlots where they're fattened for several months before heading to slaughter. Feeder cattle are a big part of Montana's \$1 billion-a-year livestock industry. Few states import more Montana cattle than Nebraska.

Hughes said his state imposed similar restrictions on Wyoming counties bordering the park when its brucellosis-free status was revoked several years ago.

"There's a lot of feeder heifers that go from Montana to Nebraska, especially from those counties," said Errol Rice, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association.

Rice said Nebraska is such a big player in Montana's cattle market that ranchers would have a hard time working around the requirements by shipping their cattle elsewhere.

Cattle farther away from Yellowstone National Park face less stringent standards, a certificate of veterinary inspection or a registered brand.

Cattle insiders said that what Nebraska essentially did was split the state into two classifications. That's not unlike what Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer has been urging the state Board of Livestock to do since last fall. However, the governor's proposal called for singling out a smaller area than the one excluded by Nebraska.

"The difference is that we know the ground, the geography. So we can use a scalpel to create a split state," Schweitzer said. "Those state vets, in lieu of any other information, what would you expect them to do?"

Schweitzer proposes drawing distinct boundaries around the Yellowstone, Gallatin and Madison river valleys, areas that bison and elk naturally travel through when leaving Yellowstone National Park. Though the area would include parts of Park, Gallatin and Madison counties, parts of those counties probably wouldn't be included.

There's no obvious wildlife corridor between Yellowstone National Park and rancher Tom Milesnick's place outside of Belgrade. By car the two points are more than 90 miles apart. He sends steers into Nebraska and yearling heifers into Iowa. Requirements for steers aren't as strict, so he wasn't too worried about the new guidelines on Monday.

He wasn't thrilled about Gallatin County being singled out, but he also couldn't argue against it.

"I don't know if it's warranted or not, but we are very close to an outbreak," Milesnick said.

As the crow flies, his ranch is probably only 60 miles from Yellowstone National Park, he said. Elk coming out of the park and meandering through the Gallatin Range probably interact with elk living in the Bridger Mountains just east of Milesnick's ranch.

Like a lot of ranchers, Milesnick said he's not sold on split-state status. He's concerned that federal officials will feel less pressured to manage brucellosis-infected wildlife if Montana ranchland bordering the park is cut from the rest of the state.